

A Hundred Different Ways to Say I Love You by lollercakes

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Summary:

A collection of Jopper prompts and one-shots from a variety of different sources - want more? Come find me on Tumblr lollercakesff

1. Balm in the Wound

I sit watch at her feet, attention carefully turned to the floor as the tears drip from her cheeks. She's quiet in her sorrow, rarely letting a breath escape on a wayward sob that would tell of the sadness coursing through her. But she's always been like this, ever since we were kids, hiding her feelings behind silence and shuttered eyes until she disappeared into herself.

I couldn't let her do that this time - we needed her to keep fighting - but I can't help her now anymore than I could help Bob as the dogs from the Upside Down tore through him. All I can do is stand watch while it happens and try to keep the world held together with the tips of my fingers.

"Joyce - " I stutter as I open the cabin door and find her on my porch, her tiny frame wrapped in her thinning winter coat as shivers rake through her.

I hadn't expected to see her. It had been weeks since the gate was closed and there was a distance between us that neither of us knew how to broach. Besides, El was staying at her place with the gang for a movie night and she was supposed to be the chaperone. But here she stood, haunting my doorstep with her wide eyes and cherry red cheeks and an expression on her face that made my chest constrict.

"Can I come in?" She asks lowly, watching as I swing the door open slowly to give her entry.

I watch in silence as she steps across the threshold before turning to me, eyes averted as her hands clutch her coat lapels closer to her neck.

“Who’s looking after the kids?” I question as I lean against the counter, arms crossing over the thin thermal underwear I’m wearing. Sometime between my microwave dinner in front of the TV and turning in early the wood stove had died down, a chill filling the cabin and creeping into my bones as I stood before her.

“Jonathan is there. Don’t worry,” she sighs and it sounds exasperated, like she was tired of me already.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I counter abruptly, my shackles up. I force myself to huff out a breath and rub my hand over my face, pausing in my beard and scratching as she toes the floorboard with her boot.

I try to wait her out but when nearly ten minutes pass and she doesn’t say a thing I sigh and walk towards the living area, sinking into the couch and wrapping myself up in the ratty blanket that had seen better days. Joyce follows me slowly, my ears perked as she unzips her jacket and lays it across the kitchen table behind me before taking a few steps towards me. I’m willing to wait her out, but that willingness is shrouded by a heavy yawn, my eyes closing as exhaustion starts to creep back in.

The feel of her small frame climbing onto my lap has my eyes snapping open in surprise, wide and bright as her lips crash into mine. I stay frozen for a moment, hands locked at my side as she presses in closer and urges my mouth open with her tongue. Slow to react, I lift my hand to her side tentatively, confused and aroused at

the same time by the way she's rubbing against me and taking the lead so forcefully.

It's so unlike Joyce that it gives me pause, my fingers ghosting over her brow before pushing her away so that I can see her eyes, see the way they shutter and close.

"Hop," she moans brokenly, teeth biting her lip like she used to do when she was facing a decision she didn't want to make.

"What's going on Joy?" I press, my hands constantly moving to rub heat back into her still shivering body. She opens her eyes then and they're filled with emotion, fury and hurt and rejection rolled into a mess she can no longer contain.

"I just want to forget," she whispers as it starts to spill from her like an overflowing cup. Her arms come up to wrap around her waist as she sits back on my knees, unwilling to separate from me but determined to stay close. "Please help me forget."

The plea is low and raspy, her gaze shifting until it locks on mine and burns through me like a fever. I want to give in - desperately - but I worry that appeasing her now will tear us apart in the future. I can't lose her, not after everything.

"Joy," I start as my hands sink to her waist, gripping tightly. "I don't want to be only this for you."

It catches her off guard, that much is obvious in the way she recoils ever so slightly, mouth clamping shut as she thinks of what she wants to say. I can practically see the gears turning in her mind as she takes my hands in hers, lifting them to her chest.

“You’ll never be only this for me. But for right now, that’s what I need from you,” she finally replies, voice steady and eyes hard. The words punch into my chest and my heart sinks as she draws closer, lips finding mine once again.

I try not to let the hurt come out of me through my kiss, try to shove it down as I get lost in the way her body crawls into mine and takes root with every touch and every breath. When she reaches her hand into my waistband and grips my length I nearly fall apart right there, my body having missed the feel of her after so much time had passed between us.

She’s eager to finish here on the couch but I make her pause while I carry her to my bed, sinking down onto the lumpy mattress and losing myself once more inside of her. We push and pull at each other until we’re both breathless, bodies fighting to drag ourselves higher and finally feel alive.

When she comes apart in my arms, my body emptying itself within her, her cry of pleasure dissolves into a strangled moan and instinctively I pull her tighter to me as her hands slap at my chest.

“Joyce,” I whimper as she fights against my embrace, her change in emotions so quick that it drags me down with her until the tears are filling my own eyes and I’m desperate to hold her closer.

"I feel like I can't breathe," she cries out, twisting away from me with a sob. I nearly let her go then, her pain radiating off of her like a fire. But I fight to hold on to show her that I'm not going anywhere, that no matter her pain, I've got her.

"It's okay Joy," I assure her with broken words, holding her chest to mine and wrapping her up in me. "You'll be okay."

2. "I've Missed This"

"Mom, can we get popcorn?" Will shouts from the distance, running up towards where we're sitting on the edge of the Blazer's rear gate. Joyce sighs and digs in her purse, coming up with a couple spare dollars.

"Here - the movies are about to start, so don't get too distracted in there," she laughs and watches as Will sprints back towards where Mike and El are standing near the park holding hands.

"We should have asked them to get us some," I joke as I wrap my arm around her and exhale the smoke in my lungs. Joyce lifts her hand to grab the cigarette from my lips, choking on the unfiltered burn and pulling away.

"Jesus Hop," she coughs, slapping at my chest before handing it back.

"Are you excited for the thrilling adventures of *Rambo II*?" I chide as the setting sun starts to disappear behind the treeline. We're at the drive-in just out of town, the truck parked in just a way so that Joyce and I can watch *Rambo* while the kids take in *The Goonies* on the screen before us.

"Not even a little. But it'll beat paying to watch what I get for free at home," Joyce replies and turns her gaze to where Will, El and Mike are barreling towards us. They're loaded down with candy and popcorn, eyes wide as they speak over each other. "Oh, Twizzlers! I love those!"

“I know, Mom. I got them for you,” Will says before handing her the pack and making her shoulders slump with the emotion that always seems to overwhelm her when Will shows how good a kid he is.

“It’s starting!” El squeals as the screens darken and then flicker to life with the concession videos. I watch as she turns to Mike with a broad smile on her face, one reserved solely for this kid and me, when I let her have Eggos for dinner.

“Alright, alright,” I huff as I step down from the gate and turn to help Joyce hop down, my hands quick to wrap around her waist. Her face flushes at the contact but she doesn’t push away like she used to and I take that as a good sign, lingering my hand against her back as we move towards our place in the front of the truck.

“You’re pretty hands on tonight, Hop,” Joyce laughs as I close the window between the cab and the truck bed, telling myself it’s to separate the two movie soundtracks but in reality hoping for a bit more privacy to pretend like Joyce and I are here as something more than just chaperones.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean - “ I start and she smiles into her lap, glancing up at me beneath her eyelashes.

“I didn’t say I hated it,” she offers lowly before turning towards the movie screen ahead of us, our previews starting.

We spend half of the movie on our own sides of the front bench, mocking the action sequences that are corny and filled with gore, the acting stale and predictable to us. When the temperature dips around

halfway through I finally notice Joyce shivering against the window, her head leaning on the glass as she yawns.

“Hey,” I mumble over the gunshots, turning to grab at the emergency wool blanket I keep behind the seat. A quick glance at the kids in the back show them bundled up in their own sleeping bags, laughter undeterred by the cool summer breeze picking up around us. “Wanna share?” I offer the blanket and take to shaking it out as she nods.

“Thanks Hop,” she mumbles as she sits forward and places the blanket over her legs, her frame tensing up as the edge of the blanket lifts and pulls away as I tuck the other end over me. “I thought we were sharing?” She groans and tugs it back towards her.

“We are. Get over here,” I add and reach for her, my arm extended until she slides closer and leans against my chest. I try to hide the way my breathing stutters and my pulse flies as she rests her head on my shoulder, my arm sliding across the back of the bench pulling the blanket edge over her side. “Better?” My voice cracks awkwardly and I can feel the heat flush my cheeks.

“Yes, thank you,” she sighs, belying the way her body remains tense.

I try to pay attention to the other half of the movie but it’s near impossible as Joyce starts to curl in closer, her hands on my chest and leg, fingers restless in a way that drives me crazy. When she eventually yawns, her breath hot on my neck, I can’t stop myself from glancing down at her and catching her gaze in the darkness.

“I’ve missed this,” I say quietly, honesty burning through me and

incapable of being kept inside any longer. She blinks before looking away, her hand gripping the buttons of my flannel and pulling anxiously.

“Hop,” is all she manages before sitting up and away from me. I see the hurt of her loss flicker across her features briefly before she looks back up at me, determination taking over. Before I realize what’s happening she’s leaning up and pressing her lips to mine, hands pulling at my shirt as she steals my breath.

When she pulls away, her lips barely an inch from mine, I exhale and let my hands roam up her sides to her chin, cupping her face gently. “Where did that come from?” My question is barely audible over the sound of the movie in the background, the final battle scene underway in all of its viciousness.

“I’ve missed this too, but didn’t know how to tell you in so many words,” she replies with bright eyes, the sleepiness from earlier seemingly gone as she runs her hand over my chest under the blanket. I try to force my body to relax at her roaming touch but my pants grow tight at the contact despite my efforts and I have to close my eyes to refocus, breathing heavy.

“Thank god,” I counter and pull her to me for a blistering kiss before holding her back once more. “As happy as I am to hear you say this - and Jesus Joyce, I’m happy - I don’t think that now’s the best time for me to show you how happy this makes me,” I finish lamely and tilt my head towards where the kids are spread out behind us.

Joyce’s gaze flies between me and the kids as her cheeks turn red, her teeth chewing on her lip in a way that affects me more than I’d like to admit. “Very good point, Hopper,” she sighs but doesn’t pull away,

instead leaning back in towards me. “Will you stay over tonight?”

I search her eyes at her question, thumbs pressing gently into her jaw as she smiles and brings my palm to her lips. “Are you sure?” I ask, breathless. The bridge she’s offering to cross with me is significant and I don’t want to force her hand. We’ve got too much on the line to risk it all if she isn’t sure.

“One hundred percent,” she adds with a smile that melts me and has me drawing her in for a quickly deepening kiss. When we eventually break apart we’re both struggling for air, bodies close and hands finding skin in a way that we definitely need to put a hold on before either of us lose our minds.

“Thank you for waiting all this time,” Joyce sighs before settling back into my shoulder, eyes trained forward.

“I’d wait forever for you,” I reply so quietly that she must not hear it, her attention once more turned to the film. I press a kiss to the crown of her head and smile into her hair, excitement for having her back in my arms after all these years winning out over the nerves of what’s to come for us.

3. People are staring...

“People are staring, Hop,” Joyce whispers against my skin, her breath hot on my ear as I run my nose along the stretch of her neck. My hands are busy at her hips, holding her close and pressing my fingers until they leave marks through the thin fabric of her dress.

I still can’t manage words, my throat thick with unshed tears as I hide my face against her and cling to the comfort and familiarity she offers.

Tonight was supposed to be a happy occasion. It was Hawkins Homecoming and I’d finally pulled my head out of my ass to ask her to go with me, certain that she’d say yes after all we’d been through this past year with Will and El and Bob. And she had said yes, even agreeing to come for the dinner portion on my arm like we were back in highschool making it official.

The evening had started out promising enough - I’d taken El’s advice and gone full-cheese, letting El pick out a corsage at the only flower shop in town and ironing my best button-down shirt and suitcoat. Joyce had been stunning in her new dress, one that fit against her in all the right places. I’d even promised Jonathan I’d have her back before midnight, as though the kid had any say in what his mother and I got up to tonight.

We’d arrived at the school gym giddy like teenagers, laughing through our nostalgia and getting caught up in the haze of smoke and memories. Our table was full of familiar faces and it had made Joyce pause for the first time that night, her hand tightening in mine as we approached.

“Joyce! Chief!” Karen Wheeler squealed as she stood up, her napkin falling from her lap as her wide eyes roamed over us and fell on our hands, pausing before looking back up to us. Joyce had tried to let go in that moment, tried to pull away, but I’d been determined not to let her get spooked by this. We were doing this. We had to.

“Hey Karen, Ted,” I nodded towards the table and tugged Joyce forward gently, pulling out her chair for her. The ice had broken then and conversation had come easier, our appearance together - really *together* - being accepted without much fanfare.

And from there she’d started to come out of her public shell, started to be the Joyce I’d come to love beyond the childish infatuation I’d had when we were younger. It had been easy to fall into her as we shared a bottle of wine, easy to ask her to dance when Cyndi Lauper came on the speakers, easy to just be with her in that moment.

But somewhere between the transition of songs I’d been looking at her and she’d been looking at me and my throat had closed up, tears burning at the back of my eyes until I couldn’t do it anymore and I hid my face against her neck, breathing her in as I forced my heart to slow down.

“People are staring, Hop.” I could feel her body tensing in my arms, her fingers slipping from their place against my scalp.

“Sorry,” I mumble as I pull back, my face flushed as I catch her gaze. She instantly softens, hands coming to my cheeks and brushing at the skin below my eyes.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” She whispers as her body moves to the music, dragging me along with her.

“I don’t - “ I pause and run my hand up her side, cupping her cheek as my feet stop moving. Her eyes widen and her breath hitches, her tongue snaking out to wet her lips.

It’s an invitation that I don’t ignore, leaning down to press my mouth to hers and deepening the kiss when her hands curl into my collar. I drag it out until I’m starving for air, pulling away only to rest my forehead against hers, hands restless as they fight to find her skin.

“Let’s get out of here,” she whispers as the music threads around us, her bruised lips turned up in a smile.

Following her lead we disappear into the parking lot, pausing to steal kisses up against the side of the building, in doorways, standing in the middle of the road. When we eventually make it to the Blazer I swing open the passenger door and help her climb up, stopping to take advantage of the fact that she’s finally at my level.

My hands slide up the skin of her legs, stalling at her knees until she opens them and I can step closer to her. She’s warm and draws me in, a rogue ankle wrapping around my hip as her hands slide behind my neck.

“What were you thinking back there, before...?” She sighs against me as my mouth drags across her collarbone. When I don’t answer after a

moment she tugs on my ear to break me from my haze, foggy with want as I look up towards her.

"Joyce," I mumble, desperate to abandon that moment in time. But she won't let it pass and keeps her hands on my shoulders, watching as the feelings slink through me. "I realized how happy I was. How happy I was since Sara."

Her eyes close at the mention of my daughter, her lips finding mine in a gentle kiss that shares an intimacy I've missed after all these years. I revel in it and feel it like a balm over my wounds, Joyce's hands pulling me back against her.

Everything sinks away as she pulls at my shirt tails, her hands sliding against the skin of my back as her nails trace lines of ownership into me. My own hands move under her dress and to her hips, toying with the hem of her underwear until she leans back on her arms and stares at me with a heavy-lidded gaze. I take her move as permission and drag her underwear down her legs, stuffing them in my pocket and pulling her to the edge of the seat.

"Is this okay?" I ask lowly, breathless, as my fingers graze over the curls at the apex of her thighs. She nods and flexes her legs, drawing me closer to her with a glint in her eye. Chuckling lightly I push her dress to her hips and bend to trail kisses up her legs, her heady scent drawing me closer until my lips find her center.

She keens at the contact, a quiet moan escaping her as my mouth and my hands drag her to the edge and pull her over. Body vibrating, she recovers by pulling at my tie until my body is covering hers, lips finding mine once again in the low light.

“Get in here and close the door,” she hisses as her hands work on my belt, eyes alight.

“People could be staring,” I chide as her teeth nip at my skin, drawing a gasp from me.

“Let them watch. We’ve waited for this long enough.”

4. Wait, you're jealous?

I didn't want to see this.

Turning on my heel I stalked away from the window of Melvald's and away from the sight of Bob "The Brain" Newby wrapping his arms around Joyce's waist.

I hadn't come to spy on her - the exact opposite, actually - I'd simply been walking by the store when I'd stopped to look through the window. It was a regular occurrence for me now that Joyce and I were on better terms, our friendship having strengthened since finding Will in the Upside Down a few months ago.

Convinced we'd bonded, I'd taken to accompanying her to Will's doctor appointments, coffee breaks, and all manner of informal lunches as we reminisced and kept each other company. Mistakenly, I'd thought maybe we were heading somewhere. That the old flame from high school was ready to be rekindled.

But the sight of Joyce leaning into Bob's kiss, her smile bright as she pulled away, spoke more than any stolen cigarette break could. She was moving on with her life and she was doing it without me.

Hurt, miserable and moody, I piled into my truck and turned the music on the radio to a deafening level before peeling out of my parking spot and taking off down the road. I was halfway back to the cabin before I turned the radio down and lightened the press of my foot on the gas. In addition to our standard rules, El had made me promise to never come home mad, our arguments always spiraling out of control when things were already bothering us.

Not wanting to drag her down with me, I willed myself to shove the feelings down and close off the possibilities that my mind had been turning over for weeks now. Joyce didn't see us as an option and I had to be okay with that - I'd promised to be there for her son and that wasn't going to change. Not even a little.

"El, I'm going to heat up a pizza," I decide as I push through the door of the cabin, beelining to the fridge to grab a beer as she waves at me from the couch. I get dinner going and then join her on the cushions, sighing heavily as I down half the can.

"What's wrong?" She questions quietly from my side, her eyes wide as she stares at me.

"Nothing, kid," I reply and take another sip, shoulders rolling with tension.

"I don't believe you. Your face is all bunched up and you have more wrinkles than normal." Turning to meet her gaze I feel my face frowning as she leans towards me and runs a finger across my brow. "See? More lines," she states and sits back into her spot.

The feel of her hand on my brow makes me close my eyes, her touch reminding me of when Sara used to wipe the tears from my cheeks when something sad happened. I have to force myself to take a deep breath, emotions overwhelming me.

"Everything is okay. Just had a rough day," I respond and try to show

her that everything will be fine by forcing a smile to my lips.

She merely shakes her head, voice reminding me that “Friends don’t lie,” before turning back towards the TV.

Later that night, after we’ve finished our meal and I’m pacing and wandering uselessly around the small space, El gets up from her chair and stares at me until I stop to look at her. “What?” I grumble, hands on my hips.

“You need to go,” she states, mirroring my pose.

“What? No I don’t - “

“You’re upset. We said no anger here,” and her steadfastness is admirable. “Go drive and come back.”

I don’t argue with her, heading back out to my truck and pulling into Joyce’s driveway before I even realize I’m doing it. I sit there for who knows how long, mulling over my thoughts and trying to figure out the best way to approach the topic.

She forces my hand though when she comes to bring the garbage to the curb, noticing quickly my truck in her driveway and coming to join me for a smoke. I try to hide what I’m feeling but she sees through it, hesitant to give my cigarette back when she notices the look on my face.

“Why are you here, Hopper?” She questions lightly, cocking her head.

“I... “ The words die in my throat and I have to look out the window, the lights from the house making me squint in the dark night. “I don’t know,” it sighs out of me in a huff.

“It’s just - you didn’t come by on your break this afternoon,” she says when I don’t continue, her hand slowly reaching across to hand me the cigarette. I take it from her and shrug, the drag bolstering me.

“I saw you with Bob The Brain today,” I say after a moment of stretched silence between us, the smoke hanging thick in the air.

“So you decided not to say hello because I was helping a customer?” Her voice raises an octave as she leans forward, eyes wide.

I twist my hands on the wheel and shift in my seat, tension vibrating through me. Shaking my head I pull my hat from my head and examine it carefully. “No - that’s not - I know, Joyce,” I say quietly, my voice rough around the edges.

“Know what? Hopper, you’re being ridiculous,” she laughs and it’s tight, forced, her fingers grabbing the cigarette from me. She chokes on the smoke, the move giving away her own inner anxiety.

“I’m not - Joyce, just be honest with me, please?” I crush my hat in

my hands before pulling out another smoke and slapping the lighter in the dashboard to start heating up. I chew on the filter as I wait for it to pop, teeth aching from the pressure.

“Wait, are you jealous? Is that you’re being like this?” She asks, leaning towards me until I have to look at her.

“I’m not jealous,” I mumble, my eyes straying towards my lap again.

“Hop...” She sighs and when I don’t look up again she reaches her hand out to press her finger against my chin, forcing me to meet her gaze. “I think you’re jealous,” she chides, watching me with an intensity that inflames the red of my cheeks.

“I’m not jealous. I’m hurt.”

It hangs heavy between us, the only sound that of the lighter popping and causing me to look away from her expression of surprise. I move slowly as I lift the red end of the lighter to my cigarette, the inhale soothing me until I’m able to look back up at Joyce with a more level head.

“Hop,” she whispers, voice cracking on the upturn.

“It’s okay, Joy. I’m not going anywhere. I should get going though. I’ll see you and Will on Thursday, okay?” It kills me to say it, to pull away from her, but I have to. She didn’t pick me and that was fine. We could still be friends. But that didn’t mean it didn’t ache to watch

as she stepped out of the truck, her hand lingering on the door before she lets go and disappears back into the house.

5. Rough Night

Dropping down onto the edge of the bed, Hopper groans and rubs his forehead, cringing at the way it vibrates with every movement. He'd had far too much to drink last night, his tolerance having become almost non-existent in the past year and he had vastly overestimated the amount of alcohol he could handle.

But looking back through the fog he was certain it had been a damn good St Patrick's day party at the station.

"Mmm, Hop," Joyce mumbles from behind him, her hand coming up and sliding over his shoulder blade. "Is it morning already?"

Smiling to himself he leans back until his head rests against her stomach, his fingers pulling her hand to his chest. Her resulting moan echoes his and he chuckles, lifting her knuckles to his lips.

This hadn't been how he'd planned the night to go when he'd asked Joyce to accompany him to the annual St Patrick's day party. He'd only intended to get her out of her house again, the months since Bob's death having been riddled with bouts of sadness that kept her home too often. Hopper had made it his personal mission to ensure she didn't fall into the same cracks he had after Sara and regularly asked her out for coffee, lunch and any other reason he could think of once a week.

The party had been one of those invitations, careless and light, but when he'd shown up on her front doorstep something had shifted for him when she answered the door. The emerald green t-shirt she hid under a too big cardigan made her skin look like porcelain and her

eyes pop, her hair somehow tamed but still unruly. She'd been a sight that had made him swallow back his words until Will pushed around her hip and gave him a solid warning to have her home by midnight.

They'd driven to the station in his Blazer with the promise that he'd stay sober enough to get her home safe and that he'd make sure she had a good time. That promise had lasted about as long as it took for Joyce to find out Flo was already in charge of getting people home with a sober ride, her smile growing as the older woman gave her a welcoming hug.

"Here you go, try to keep up," Joyce shouted across the music, handing Hopper a cup with some version of heavily alcoholic punch in it. The moment brought him back to highschool, the feeling familiar and overwhelming as Joyce grinned over the edge of the plastic at him.

There were games and karaoke and somewhere in the mash of it all he'd ended up dancing with Joyce in the corner of the room, her arms wrapped around his neck and her body flush against his. In his mind's eye he couldn't even picture anyone else dancing with them, his focus so totally on the woman in his arms that everything else had faded away.

Somehow they'd been deposited back on Joyce's doorstep later that night, her hands fumbling as she tried to fit the key into the lock. He remembered taking it from her, pressing a quick and sloppy kiss to her cheek before opening the door and guiding her through to her room. Hopper was almost positive that he had attempted to head back to the living room couch after she was safely tucked in bed because he remembered losing his balance when her fingers twisted in his shirt in protest.

“Don’t leave,” she had whispered as he’d used his hand to hold himself above her, his body swaying with the drink coursing through him. The plea had come out so quietly that he’d had to squint his eyes to focus on her, his mind spinning with what she was asking of him. He’d stayed, had crawled in next to her and held her as she drifted off into a restless sleep.

He’d woken up still in his clothes from the night before, the small grace saving him from what could have been a pretty critical error on his part. Nowhere in his plan to help her through her loss had he considered that the feelings they’d had in high school would spark once more, the possibility so far removed with everything going on that it hadn’t even registered with him. But waking up to find her tucked against him, her tiny frame wrapped around his, the obviousness of it had slapped him in the face.

Stumbling into the bathroom and the shower, he’d washed the stink from the night away and tried to pry his eyes back open to look at the situation with more clarity. It only made the world spin faster until he heard one of the kids head into the kitchen, his luck running out as he figured El or Will would catch him in this compromised moment. Panic laced through him as he shut off the water, unsure what to do in his hazy state. With no other option, he wrapped a towel around his waist and grabbed his clothes from the floor before sneaking back into Joyce’s room and closing the door with a snap.

That’s how he’d wound up here, leaning back against her and revelling in her warmth and the way the world spun just a little less when he was with her.

“One of the kids is up,” he mumbles, closing his eyes as she runs her

fingers through his hair.

“Yeah, I heard. How are you feeling?” Her voice is soft, more so than usual, and it feels like she reserved it just for him in this moment.

“I feel great. I ran a 5k this morning,” he replies with a laugh that turns into a groan, her own body vibrating under him with the feel of it.

“Really?” She shifts until she’s leaning against the headboard, her gaze lingering over his exposed chest before sliding back up to his face.

“No, I threw up in the shower,” he adds as he closes his eyes, her bark of laughter making his head pound.

“Oh Hop, I’m sorry,” she sighs as her laughter subsides, running her hand over his jaw and leaning forward to press a kiss to his forehead. The feel of it makes him smile, his chest tightening at her touch. “Thank you for getting me out last night. I had a really good time.”

Grabbing for her hand once more he turns until he’s facing her, eyes focused on her and the way her hair curls around her face. She’s beautiful, he remembers then and it rolls through him with a heavy nostalgia that makes him ache.

“I always have a good time when I’m with you,” he admits quietly, watching the way her face changes with the weight of his honesty.

“Me too.” Is all she manages, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips. The unspoken truth stretches out between them and that feeling from the night before, the one where something important had shifted, comes back and steals the breath from his lungs as she leans down to kiss him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Inspired by this incorrect ST quotes post:
[http://weatheredlaw.tumblr.com/
post/167579969224/incorrect-stranger-things-x](http://weatheredlaw.tumblr.com/post/167579969224/incorrect-stranger-things-x)

6. that time they don't talk about

It was late. Too late. The house was quiet and the shadows were bigger than ever, casting across the walls and closing in on her like the memory of the first time that monster came through the peeling wallpaper. Her anxiety was at a peak as she sat against her headboard, listening to the creak of the wind as it rapped at her windows. Beyond that she trained her ears to listen for any signs of nightmares from Will or Jonathan sneaking in after curfew, anything to distract her from the things she couldn't stop thinking about.

It'd been only a week since those monsters came back. One week since Bob was killed by those demons from the Upside Down. Her body still ached from the stress and the fear that coursed through her in those horrible days and she looked at the pill bottle still full with the Valium her doctor had prescribed her, unwilling to give into the relief that they promised.

She couldn't do it. She had to be alert and protect her boys. They needed her.

But she couldn't stop the tears that rushed at her every night when she retreated to her own room, silence and loneliness wrapping around her like a wet blanket. Here in these hours she had nothing to keep her grounded and her mind occupied so she focused in on what had happened with the strength of a laserbeam. It was eating away at her and she had to fix it.

Maybe that's why she'd picked up the phone tonight, had cried into the receiver until the warm voice on the other end promised that he'd be over soon. She'd felt bad for pulling him from his own bed but she hadn't known what to do anymore - this couldn't go on anymore and

she needed someone to tell her it was going to be alright. Someone who knew the pain of loss and could keep that promise.

The boots crossing the floor of her kitchen, the quiet steps down the hall, has her bolting to her door and opening it widely to see Hopper startle as she looks up at him. His eyes go wide at the sight of her, his frown deepening as his hand inadvertently raises to run his finger along the curve of her neck.

“Joy,” he whispers, swallowing heavily as he takes in the bruising around her collar. When she realizes what he’s doing she grabs his hand away, pulling him into the room and closing the door quickly and quietly.

“Shh, Will is asleep down the hall,” she instructs, turning away and opening her closet. She disappears into it and when she comes back out it’s with a scarf around her neck, the look absolutely ridiculous and it causes Hopper to snort out loud.

“You don’t have to cover up on my account,” he mumbles, sitting on the edge of the bed and easing off his boots. In another moment he’s lifting the six pack of beer he’d brought off of the floor and cracking a can open to hand to her. She takes it willingly and watches as he opens his own, leaning back against the headboard with ease. “I figured these would help with what’s going on, at least temporarily. Not a long term solution, but for tonight, enough.”

She nods and joins him on the mattress, easing down and crossing her legs as she sits at his knees. Neither of them say much, the simple act of Hopper being there providing relief and comfort that Joyce had so desperately needed. It’s only when she’s half into her second beer that she starts to actually relax, the warmth colouring her cheeks and

giving herself permission to lean against the headboard next to him.

Hopper nurses his single can well into her third and doesn't say a thing when she sniffs and leans against him, her body curling closer until he wraps his arm around her shoulders. "I'm not here for any funny business," he whispers as she tucks in closer, breathing slowly.

"I know. I'm just lonely," she admits lowly and looks up at him with those big doe eyes. He catches sight of the bruises again and swallows the words he wants to say back down, instead choosing to run his hand along the scarf, pulling until it comes loose.

"You don't have to hide these from me," he states before tossing the fabric to the side of the bed. Sheepishly she leans back and watches him watching her, a hand coming to ghost over the skin at her neck. "I didn't realize you had them," he adds when she frowns and looks away.

"It happened at the cabin. I guess we were all a bit distracted then," she replies. The memory of Will's hands wrapped around her windpipe flashes through her and she snaps her eyes shut, sighing heavily.

"Why didn't you tell me you were having this hard of a time sooner? You know I'm here for you, right?" Hopper sets his empty can down next to hers and twists to look at her head on. She only shrugs, eyes trained on the wall, before he realizes she's crying silently. "Hey, Joy, no, don't do that. Come here..." He reaches his arms out towards her, pulling her into his chest and ignoring the way her tears soak his shirt.

Slowly easing them down, he holds her against him as he runs his hands across her back, desperately trying to soothe the ache from inside her. He can only do so much though and when she rolls onto her back a few moments later it's with a bitter laugh.

"Sorry," she mumbles when the laughter dissipates, Hopper propping himself up on his elbow to look down at her.

"You don't need to apologize."

"I cried all over you like a baby," she says, sighing and glancing up towards him.

"It's okay. El does it all the time so I'm used to it by now. Do you want me to hangout here until you fall asleep?" He tries to stifle the hopefulness in his voice, watching her closely as she rolls over to face him. Nodding, she reaches a hand across the bedspread and grips his tightly.

"Thank you for coming over, Hop," she whispers, trying to convey with just a look everything that she can't put into words. She's pretty he gets it when he reaches out and invites her into his arms, the silent agreement between them extending into the morning.

Notes for the Chapter:

Inspired by this post by formerlyjannafaye
<https://formerlyjannafaye.tumblr.com/post/171608061593/formerlyjannafaye-joyce-wore-turtlenecks-for-2>

7. the fall

It came over El like a shadow, first a drop in her gaze followed by a crease in her brow. Joyce watches as the girl's lips turn down and a distant look crosses over her features. The blood at her nose, a tell-tale sign of her powers, makes the hair on the back of Joyce's neck stand up as she grips the book she'd been halfheartedly reading tight enough to turn her knuckles white.

"Mama," El's voice whispers from her place on the floor next to Will. Turning, Will looks up from his drawing and lays a hand on El's shoulder, head dipping towards her.

"El? Is everything okay?" He asks quietly as Joyce watches on. When the girl simply reaches out towards nothing, her expression crumbling more with every second, Joyce moves to stand from the kitchen table and lifts her hand towards the phone on the wall.

"Mama!" El screams as the blood drips to her lip, her small frame lurching forward as Will jolts away. Her son only takes a second to recover before calling for Joyce and wrapping El up in his arms tightly. "No! Mama, no!" Her small frame fights against Will's arms as Joyce hurriedly dials the station, desperate to get Hopper on the line.

"Mom! Mom, something's wrong!" Will shouts over El's cries, his panicked face looking up to where she grips the doorframe. The line rings once, twice, three times before Flo picks up on the other end.

"Hawkins Police - "

“Flo, I need Hop right away,” Joyce says evenly into the phone, her voice rattling as Flo sighs.

“Joyce, this line is for actual police business - “ Flo starts, exasperation evident.

“I know - it’s an emergency. It’s his daughter. Something’s wrong.” On the other end of the phone Flo clicks the line to hold before an old dial tone rings her through to Hopper’s desk, the gruff voice on the other end annoyed as two voices in the background shout at each other.

“Joyce, I’m kinda dealing with something here,” Hopper grumbles, leaning away from the phone to shout at the people who are in his office. She can hear Callahan trying to quiet people down before Hopper drops the phone and a chair scrapes loudly on the line.

“Hop, it’s about Jane,” Flo shouts loud enough over the group that Joyce can hear it through the phone, the woman likely coming in to convey the urgency of her call. She must have known that Hopper’s first priority was his daughter, before anything else, and she knew Joyce wasn’t kidding when she called about her.

“Joy, what’s going on? Flo looks like she’s seen a ghost,” Hopper says after picking the phone back up, the plastic clapping against the desk before ruffling up to his ear.

“It’s El. Something’s wrong,” Joyce states and watches as the girl

cries in her son's arms.

"Wrong how? Joyce," his voice cracks and behind him she can hear Callahan shouting at whoever was in his office that they had to leave. Even without seeing him she could picture the look on his face, the fear that was ghosting over his features as he reached for his keys.

"She just started shouting about her mother and now she won't stop crying. Jim, you need to get over here," she adds and tries to suck in a breath at the way he gasps at her words.

The drive from the station to her place regularly takes twenty minutes but Hopper manages to do it in ten, pulling into her driveway and barely turning off the engine before barrelling through the door of her tiny house. Inside he's met with a sight that breaks his heart, El curled up in Joyce's lap, blood smearing across her features and covering Joyce's shirt. Beside them Will is holding El's hand and rubbing her back soothingly, his face stricken with anxiety.

"El," Hopper croaks as he steps through the door and removes his hat, stress pouring from him as he tries to read the situation. The little girl he'd taken as his own this past year twists from Joyce's embrace and looks up towards him, her expression crumbling again.

"Mama is gone," she whimpers, getting to her feet and stumbling into his arms. His heart shatters as she falls apart, his body sinking down to his knees and pulling her against his chest as she sobs against him.

Looking over her shoulder Hopper catches sight of Joyce and Will clinging together, tears falling from both their eyes as the truth of the

moment becomes apparent. Something has happened to Terry Ives. Something bad. And El knows.

“I’ll go call Becky,” Joyce whispers when the realization sets in, her hand running through Will’s hair before getting to her feet.

Time stretches on as Hopper lifts El into his arms and makes his way to the chair in the corner of the living room, the girl clinging to him as though he were about to disappear. He tries to hold it together, tries to stop the tears from pricking at the back of his eyes, but when she moans out that she was all alone now, the wall inside him falls and tightens his hold on her.

“No, kid, you’re not. I’m here, you’ve got me,” he mumbles and presses his lips to the crown of her head before resting his cheek against her curls.

Joyce returns after what seems like forever, her shirt changed and a damp face cloth in hand as she crouches next to the arm of the chair. Without saying a thing she communicates the truth to Hopper, the exclamation slipping from his lips as he squeezes El closer in his embrace.

“El, sweetheart,” Joyce whispers and reaches her hand up to rest against the girl’s back. El twists to look at her, eyes swollen and face stained with red. “Would you like to take a bath? It always helps me feel better.”

Hopper can feel his heart halving as this woman treats this girl like her own, her tenderness extending through her gentle touch and the

way she brushes El's hair out of her face. When El eventually nods he lets her go, slipping from his arms and getting to her feet with an unsteady step.

"Hop, why don't you run home and get a change of clothes for you both. You can stay here for the night until we know more," she adds as Will leads El towards the bathroom with his arm around her waist. Hopper watches as she disappears through the bathroom door, defeat hanging heavy from the slump of her shoulders.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll do that. Thank you," he sighs and rubs his hand over his face until his fingers press into his eyes. Joyce doesn't think before wrapping herself around him, her arms around his waist and her forehead against his chest.

"It's going to be okay," she says quietly, the tension in her shoulders leaving her body as he pulls her small frame against him tighter. He breathes out heavily, fingers grappling at the nape of her neck and her waist, desperate to hold her closer and draw in her strength.

"I don't know how to help her," Hopper admits after a moment. Joyce pulls away then and reaches the washcloth up to his face, gently rubbing the blood from El from his face. Her hands shake as she looks up at him, a spare hand cupping his jaw.

"You do. You will. Go get your things, I'll take care of it for a bit." Her voice belies her steady expression and she has to blink away the tears that come when his face shutters. Before she realizes she's doing it she's lifting to her toes and pressing a kiss to his lips, brief and chaste but full of hope.

When she eventually pulls away he has to tear his eyes from her, the careful agreement they've had for the last few months evolving into something new in that briefest moment.

"Go. We'll be here when you get back," Joyce urges once more before turning and stepping towards the bathroom. Walking through the door she smiles softly at the scene before her, Will kneeling on the floor as El sits in a daze on the toilet seat, his hands carefully running a face cloth over her cheeks.

"Would it be okay if I called Mike?" Will asks them both, getting to his feet as Joyce steps further into the room.

"El?" Joyce defers the question, looking to the girl staring off to the corner of the room. An almost imperceptible nod of her head has Will leaving the room and heading towards the kitchen to make the call.
"Let's get you undressed, hunny, okay?"

Joyce makes quick work of running the bath and determining the perfect temperature of the water, adding in a fair dose of her secret lavender bubble mix so that the room fills with the relaxing smell. When El climbs into the water it's with a sigh and a low sob, her brow furrowing as she tries to force the tears back down. Joyce can only offer the comfort of a hand against her back as the girl wraps her arms around her knees and curls in on herself.

It's not long before Mike's voice is calling from the other side of the door, El's head snapping up at the sound of it.

"I'll go get you some clothes so you can get dressed and see him,

okay?” Joyce says quietly, getting to her feet and exiting the bathroom. She’s taken aback when she opens the door and sees Hopper holding a plastic bag and sitting against the wall of her hallway, defeated.

“I brought her some clothes and the kid. I knew she’d want to see him,” Hopper grumbles, holding up the bag and running his other hand through his hair. Taking the bag from his hands Joyce disappears back into the bathroom and helps El get cleaned up, releasing the plug on the tub and watching as the pink liquid disappears down the drain.

“El!” Mike exclaims when she pokes her head through the bathroom doorway, his body barreling into hers and pulling her against him. Joyce cocks her head to the side as she looks down at Hopper, motioning towards the kitchen. Together they fall into the chairs at the kitchen table, Hopper reaching for his smokes and lighting up with shaking hands.

“What did Becky say?” He asks after taking a long drag, passing her the cigarette and gripping his hands together.

“She had a stroke,” she replies and chews at her thumb, the cigarette burning in her grip. “Becky took her to the hospital yesterday because she was having seizures. They called and told her today that she passed away.”

Hopper sucks in a breath and pulls out another smoke, abandoning his first one in Joyce’s tense grip. They sit there together in silence after that, Joyce’s knuckles brushing against his until he reaches over and wraps her hand up in his. Another bridge in the arrangement being crossed with every squeeze and passing of silent strength.

Sometime after the sun has set Joyce gets back to her feet and starts preparing dinner. Hopper offers to help but she turns him down, promising she can handle making her family mac and cheese recipe without his assistance. They eat spread throughout the living room, El curled up against Mike as the TV plays old movie reruns on a low volume. Nobody says much well into the evening, even as Will and Joyce pull out spare blankets and pillows for the kids to have a sleepover in the front room.

“I’ll take the floor,” Hopper mumbles from the doorway to Joyce’s room, his arms holding a set of blankets as she looks around pensively.

“Don’t be ridiculous. We can share a bed,” she adds hastily before turning to her dresser and pulling out pajamas. She clutches them to her chest as Hopper’s cheeks burn, shifting on his feet.

“We’re not kids anymore,” he adds lamely, trying to avoid her gaze. Not since prom, when out of necessity, had they shared a bed in one of the motel rooms the class had rented out for the after party. Nothing had happened then and he’d regretted it for years and now, the opportunity once again at his feet, he couldn’t give himself permission to give in to it.

“I know. Nothing has to happen, Hop. I just know you’ll be extra miserable tomorrow morning if your back aches from sleeping on the floor. I’m going to wash up, feel free to settle in,” she chimes with a small smile before leaving the room like a flash. He shuffles around awkwardly before stripping down to his boxers, laying on top of the comforter and pulling the spare blanket over him.

The day's events catch up to him as the quiet falls throughout the house, the only sound that of the dull TV playing in the distance and the off-and-on of the water from the bathroom. When Joyce returns a few moments later it's to find him with an ache in his chest that causes tears to run down his cheeks, silent and mournful. She doesn't hesitate before climbing up next to him and wrapping her arms around his shoulders, trying to absorb his sorrow into her.

"Hey, she'll be okay," she whispers against his neck, pulling the blanket up until it covers him tightly. He laughs on a sigh, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

"I know she will. I'm just worried that shit like this will keep happening to those I love and I don't want to be the reason terrible things keep happening." She draws back at his words, watching as he turns to look at her with defeat in his gaze.

"You aren't the reason this happened, Jim," Joyce states, grabbing his chin when he tries to turn away.

"I'm the reason everything bad happens. First my unit in Vietnam, then Mom, Dianne... Sara," his voice cracks on the last word, her chest constricting as his eyes squeeze shut. "I'm a black hole. Everything good gets sucked into me and spit out on the other side."

"What about me? Nothing bad has happened to me, or my boys. In fact, it's because of you that I still have them and all that's good. I'm happy because of you," she affirms and tries to convey the feeling that's filling her.

“You’re an anomaly, Joy,” he replies, finally opening his eyes and really looking at her. The moment stills between them and another second passes before he’s leaning towards her, his lips grazing her forehead as his hand grips hers in her lap. “You’re a light in this dark fucking tunnel and I’m glad you’re here always steering me home. I’m lost without you.”

There’s a charged spark that passes through the air and Joyce seizes on it, once more reaching her lips to his only this time she doesn’t pull away after the briefest of seconds. Instead she leans into it, presses him until he’s returning the kiss with a forcefulness that confirms the want is returned.

They sink down onto the mattress together, limbs tangling under the blanket as she tries to help him forget the thoughts that haunt him. When his hands scrape up her sides, hot and calloused, she keens into his mouth and let’s her nails catch the skin of his back.

“The kids were all asleep,” she whispers as he rolls her underneath him, hips trapping her against the bed. He grunts in response, seemingly lost in her while running his nose along her neck.

“Is this okay?” Hopper asks against her, his length pressing between the crux of her legs as he grows harder. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knows this isn’t the right time, that’s he’s taking advantage of the situation and putting the cart before the horse, but he can’t help it. He needs to distract himself from the war raging inside of him and if she says it’s okay he’ll happily get lost in her, if even for a moment.

“Yes, Hop, yes, it’s okay,” she replies on a sigh and hikes her leg up his hip. The move gives him the access he needs and he shifts her

underwear aside, freeing himself and sliding into her on an exhale.

There's a feeling that hurtles through him as he finds himself at home within her, his gaze finding hers in the low moonlight streaming through the window. His heart squeezes at what he sees there, waiting with stalled breath as she adjusts to him and her heavy breathing skips as he starts to move. The small sounds that escape her drive him onward and he hastily brushes the hair from her face so that he can trail kisses across her cheeks.

It doesn't take long before she's falling apart around him, her body dragging him under and to a finish that groans out of him. Spent, clinging to one another, Hopper tries to bring his breathing under control as Joyce runs a hand against his beard.

"I wanted to give you more than just a quick fuck," he grumbles as she closes her eyes and shakes her head, opening them to smile gently at him.

"In an ideal world, sure. But we're a bit of a mess in reality so this seems like a perfect moment for us," she counters and lifts her head to kiss him once more. "You can make up for it later. Why don't you try to get some sleep now? Tomorrow is sure to be another tough day and El will need you."

He rolls off her at that, pulling her into his side and dragging her hand to his chest. "Thank you for everything, Joy," he says lowly and looks down towards her.

"You don't have to thank me. I love the Hoppers," Joyce admits and

it causes Hopper to smile, really smile, for the first time all day. He knows then that even with how terrible tomorrow will be, Joyce by his side will make it okay, just like old times.

8. the story of a house

She learned not to care growing up, learned to build walls out of spit and glue. It was what her father taught her best when he finally left for good. And an easy lesson from her mother's rotating boyfriends, each one leering a bit longer than the last. Learning to turn away and to keep quiet, to keep her head down and watch for all the signs, she did it so she could get out before things got too hot. The habit served her well, all the way until she met James Hopper.

The first time they fuck it's in the back of a car, all fumbled hands and missed mouths dragging across skin and leaving marks of want and frustration. They're experienced, but not with this, and when they say goodbye at the end of the night it's awkward and clumsy in a way that leaves a bad taste in her mouth. She can't really pinpoint why, but she thinks that maybe it's because of the way he had crept into her mind and made her smile, cracked through a tiny hole in her walls, even when she'd spent years trying not to give in.

The last time they fuck it's in his childhood bed, his parents gone away for the weekend and the cool night air ghosting across their skin. This time isn't like the first time. Or all the times in between. It's different and it's terrifying and neither of them want to say goodbye so they don't. Instead they just stay there, entangled, and try not to think about the bus that will come through town in less than a day to pick him up and likely never bring him back. That bus will steal the supporting beam in her fragile structure and she'll double her efforts to keep standing.

She goes back to not caring after he leaves, ignoring his letters and cementing the walls she'd built herself in all the years before him. Reinforced and unwavering, she fought off smiling, fought off caring, as long as she could until she had Jonathan.

The smiles came back then, reserved solely for her boy, and she blocked out everything else until it all just became too much. She couldn't keep the walls up while still caring, not if she was going to keep it together. So she gave in, let Lonnie in, and it wrecked her like a brick through a window.

She was a broken house after that. Her once steady shelter having failed her, her once stoic expression having crumbled. The things she'd relied on for strength were gone and Lonnie was inside, tearing up everything until there was nothing left whole.

Nothing except her boy and the second one growing inside her. That birth gave her more than just a son, it rooted in her a strength that weaved its way into her bones. She found a way to excise Lonnie, to remove the cancer that was destroying her, and she slowly started to rebuild her walls only this time with ones that let the light in.

When her boy goes missing it's like her soul is stripped out, the carpet ripped up and the smile gone from her. Everything begins a slow collapse, a house fire taking over her in the fury of trying to find him. She barely has time to recognize that she's working with Hopper again, coming face to face with the first thing to give her her smile.

It's only fitting then that he's there when her smile comes back. He's there helping hold her walls up, there helping bring her boy back home. All the years since they lay entangled in his childhood bed find their way into her mind and scare her back into her house, carefully hidden behind a locked door and a man who is safe.

When Bob dies she thinks it must all be a cruel joke. A smoke and

mirrors version of happiness that reminds her that nothing she builds is meant to last. She has spent years building and rebuilding, years trying to keep things out when really she should have let things in. A tentative understanding threads through her then, one that has her looking outward instead of always in. It takes her a while but somewhere in the mess of it she realizes Hopper was trying to rebuild his walls too, not yet able to see her epiphany.

The first time, after all this time, that she sleeps with Hopper it's nothing more than just sleeping. It's two exhausted souls curling into one another, their haphazard walls wavering as their hands clasp together in the dead of night. It doesn't happen all at once. In fact, it doesn't happen really at all until one day they realize that they'd both stopped building two separate spaces.

Entwined, like they'd been all those years ago, she realizes she's smiling as she watches her children leave, one at a time and onto the next part of their lives. Where once this would have shattered her, a single brick leaving her structure causing it to collapse, she finds the walls she'd built with Hopper were stronger than ever. He was not a cancer or a house fire, but a carpenter keeping her together. She had room to smile, room to care, and her years of keeping things out were behind her.